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Inheritances Received and Rejected

The most obvious inheritance in the novel *Corinne, or Italy* is that of Oswald, Lord Nelvil. Because of his father’s death, he inherits a high title, lands, and wealth. The lands and wealth make seemingly no impression on Oswald. He is used to wealth and has no anxiety about losing it, so it does not occupy much of his thought other than to wisely maintain it. His social position, in terms of social status, does not seem to occupy his thought either. In these ways, he is not a vain man. What matters more to Oswald in terms of his title is his duty to his country, but most importantly, his father’s name. Because of the title involved, his father’s name is exactly his own name, and in the novel, this leaves no room for deviation from what he perceives are his father’s wishes for the kind of life and attitude Oswald should take on. What complicates this is that Oswald’s father seems to have been the kindest, most thoughtful of men. Even in his wishes for Oswald’s marriage (which are foreign to our time, but very common in the setting of the novel), he seems not tyrannical, but reasonable and loving, not only to Oswald, but to Corinne also, actually supportive of an unusual lifestyle that would allow Corinne development of her talents and her best chance at happiness and fulfillment. It is difficult to argue with his very clear eye toward the young people involved. However, because of the incident in France, and the guilt that Oswald bears over disappointing his father and not having the opportunity to rectify that disappointment, the “inheritance” creates a heavy obligation that Oswald struggles under. Oswald is right to bear some guilt over that because it is his naivete (silliness) and his indecision that exacerbate the situation. Had things been cleared up prior to his father’s death, Oswald may have felt more confident in choosing a different path than what his father had spoken of. All in all, however, because Lord Nelvil, Sr. bestowed on Oswald all that he should have, Oswald has a space in a particular place, a home in the world in every sense of that word.

Lucile enjoys a similar kind of inheritance, enjoying the inheritances of two fathers (including her late father in law, who she calls her second father), a relative who dies late in the novel as well as, very importantly, the inheritance of her strict and ailing mother, not in wealth and title, but in support and love. Though Lady Edgermond has the ability to be cruel, she is not so with Lucile. Lucile enjoys what Corinne does not, a home, a place.

Corinne’s inheritance is the most complex. First, in terms of wealth, she is provided for having received her inheritance from her father, which included support and love. However, after her father’s death, because of her stepmother’s control, she rejects the national and domestic roles that could be her inheritance in England for her inheritance through her mother in Italy. There she does enjoy the literary, intellectual, historical, and life-style inheritances while she lives there. Until she meets Oswald and a return to Scotland becomes a possibility, she is fulfilled and happy with her lot. However, in a re-telling of the Prodigal, her parent does not want to receive her again. Her inheritance has already been dispensed to her, and there is no more for her *unless she gives up Oswald*. She does not even know about this bargain when it takes place between Lady Edgermond and Oswald. She then again has a place, a home, but the circumstances are such because of the permanent loss of the relationship with Oswald, that it cannot be a home for her. She goes back to her inheritance in Italy, though even here, she feels she cannot go home to Rome because of all the prior associations with Oswald. Therefore, though Oswald has regained for her a formerly rejected disinheritance, she cannot go back to England (because of Oswald), nor can she enjoy her inheritance through her mother (also because of Oswald). Though he has no part in her family lineage, and not because he meant to, he has disinherited her twice.

In this way, Corinne is like Victor’s Creation in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Victor, like Oswald, enjoys the blessings and place inheritance offers. However, Victor intentionally denies these to his Creation several times over. Victor will not bless his progeny and the end is destruction for both of them. Oswald has taken part in Corinne’s disinheritance clumsily, not intentionally, but the result is similar. Corinne and her art are destroyed because of her perceived rejection at Oswald’s hands. She is outside a home, cannot go to any former home; she is dispossessed of familiar places, friends, and activities, and most importantly, her art, her creation. In a sense, she has become Oswald’s creation, and because of his rejection of her, she must wither away in an unproductive creative wasteland. His love for her is “shallow” enough to eventually change. Not that the change in affections happens very quickly, or that he intentionally sets out to move on to Lucile (he could have made more of an effort to find her and speak with her), but his affections change. As he heals from the guilt and grief surrounding his father’s death, which he eventually does, he makes the choice to create a life with Lucile. In this way, Oswald is spared Victor’s fate—Victor is completely destroyed by his own creative process. Oswald is not. Oswald’s feelings run only so deep, while Corinne’s, who praised the ephemeral, the momentary, finds that her feelings have far stronger roots than she imagined. Ironically, though her feelings persist and endure, she herself, the opposite of the Creation, becomes a beautiful moment of transcendence in the history of time.

Corinne also leaves a legacy. But it is not malevolence, it is benediction. She takes an active positive role in her sister’s and Oswald’s marriage, and teaches her niece music and Italian. In the end, the dispossessed heals, instructs, and blesses.